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Improve Your Musculoskeletal Health During the "Bone and Joint Decade"

Did you know that drinking too much soda or other carbonated beverages could interfere with calcium absorption - a problem that could eventually lead to osteoporosis? Or that slouching at a desk all day or tapping away at a computer keyboard can lead to painful strains in your wrists, shoulders, elbows and back?

These are just a few of the bad habits that can lead to musculoskeletal problems-conditions that have an enormous impact not only your health, but also on society as a whole. In the United States alone, musculoskeletal conditions cost society an estimated \$254 billion every year and one out of every seven Americans reports a musculoskeletal impairment.

During the "Bone and Joint Decade," 2002-2011, the American Chiropractic Association (ACA) and health care organizations worldwide urge you to take steps to prevent musculoskeletal problems before they negatively impact your life. The Bone and Joint Decade is a global, multi-disciplinary initiative targeting the care of people with musculoskeletal conditions-or bone and joint disorders. Its focus is to help improve your quality of life as well as advance the understanding and treatment of musculoskeletal conditions through research, prevention and education. Bones, and the joints that create function and movement, are connected by muscle and ligaments. Their state of health and how they enable you to lead an active and healthy life is what the Decade aims to improve.

Doctors of chiropractic, in particular, have long emphasized the importance of spinal health, posture and other lifestyle factors in the body's ability to function optimally. Poor spinal health, for instance, can cause a negative chain reaction throughout the body. It can cause stress on joints, which, especially if the muscles are weak, can cause wear and permanent damage. The ACA and your local doctor of chiropractic offer the following advice to help improve and maintain your musculoskeletal health.

At the Office:

- Make sure your chair fits correctly. There should be 2 inches between the front edge of the seat and the back of your legs. Sit with your feet flat on the floor, with your knees at a 90-degree angle. If you can't sit that way, use an angled or elevated footrest.
- Take periodic stretch breaks. Clench your hands in a fist and move your hands like this: 10 circles in, then 10 circles out. Put your hands in a praying position and squeeze together for 10 seconds and then

"pray" with the backs of your hands together, fingers pointed downward for 10 seconds. Spread your fingers apart and then bring them together one by one.

- Hold the telephone with your hand or use the speakerphone. Don't cradle the phone between your ear and shoulder. This can lock up the spinal joints in the neck and upper back, and eventually cause pain.
- Take breaks and alternate tasks that use different muscle groups.
- Arrange your desk so that everything is handy - phone, mouse, reference materials, reports - to minimize awkward stretching and reaching.
- Position your computer monitor so that the middle of your chin is aligned with the middle of your monitor. This will allow for good neck posture.

At Home:

- When you wash the dishes, open the cabinet beneath the sink, bend one knee, and put your foot on the shelf under the sink. Lean against the counter so some of your weight is supported in front.
- When resting or watching TV, don't use the sofa arm as a pillow. The angle is much too sharp for the neck.
- Don't bend from the waist when you lift a child. Squat with your back straight. Keep the child close to you and use your legs and arms to lift.

In the Yard:

- If you shovel snow, push the snow straight ahead. Don't try to throw it and walk it to the snowbank. Avoid twisting and turning motions. Bend your knees to lift when shoveling. Let your legs and arms do the work, not your back. Take frequent rest breaks to take the strain off your muscles. Try to stand as erect as possible.
- When raking leaves, use a scissors stance: right foot forward and left foot back for a few minutes; then reverse, putting your left foot forward and your right foot back. Bend at the knees, not the waist, as you pick up leaves. Make piles small to decrease the possibility of back strain.
- For mowing, use your weight to push the mower. Whenever possible, use ergonomically correct tools for the job.

Playing Sports:

- Warm up slowly before a game. Do calisthenics, flexibility exercises, or light running to increase your heart rate.
- When sweat beads form, your body is at the proper temperature to stretch the tendons and muscles.

While Traveling:

- When driving, adjust your car seat so you can sit firmly against the seat back without having to lean forward or stretch. Buckle your seatbelt and shoulder harness, and adjust the headrest so that it supports the center of the back of the head.
- Invest in a wheeled suitcase that has a sturdy handle.
- Don't always carry the weight on one side - take frequent breaks and transfer the weight to the other side.

- Don't try to carry too much. Even wheeled suitcases can cause problems to the neck, shoulders and lower back when pulled from behind.
- When traveling by air, check all bags heavier than 10 percent of your body weight. Overhead lifting of any significant amount of weight should be avoided to reduce the risk of pain in the lower back or neck. While lifting your bags, stand directly in front of the overhead compartment so the spine is not rotated. Do not lift your bags over your head, or turn or twist your head and neck in the process.
- While seated in an airplane, vary your position occasionally to improve circulation and avoid leg cramps. Massage legs and calves. Bring your legs in, and move your knees up and down. Prop your legs up on a book or a bag under your seat.

For Children:

- Have a smaller table for them where they can do their homework, rather than force them to use a standard table and chair. If the child's feet don't touch the floor, place a footrest or box under the feet. Position the computer monitor so the top of the screen is at or below the child's eye level.
- Make sure the straps of your child's backpack are padded and worn over both shoulders, not just one. Also, the contents of the backpack should not weigh more than 10 percent of your child's body weight.
- If your child is involved in sports, make sure all equipment, including helmets, pads and shoes, fits your child properly. If your teenage child is involved in soccer, make sure they are taught how to "head" the ball properly. A young child should not use the heading technique at all, according to ACA experts.
- Make sure your child has enough calcium included in his or her diet. ACA recommends 1 percent or skim milk for children over 2 years old, and whole milk for those younger than 2. The calcium in milk is essential for healthy bones and reduces the risk of joint and muscle-related injuries.
- Make sure your child avoids sugar-loaded, caffeinated and carbonated drinks. Rather, encourage them to drink plenty of water. Caffeine can dehydrate your youngster, and the high levels of phosphorous in sodas and other carbonated beverages can interfere with calcium absorption - a problem that could lead to osteoporosis down the road.

While the ACA encourages you to follow these tips for better musculoskeletal health, remember that good spinal health is but one component in a healthy lifestyle. Exercising, getting a good night's sleep, drinking plenty of water and eating a nutritious diet contribute not only to health but also to the ability to heal after an injury.

For more information on Bone and Joint Decade efforts in the United States, visit www.usbjd.org.